

STATE CAN BE A RURAL ENERGY LEADER

By Dave Ryan and Paul T. Miller – Your Turn

One of our top priorities in the global war on terror has to be to reduce our dependence on foreign oil.

Our imports of oil from the Middle East make us less secure and help fund nations whose interests are not always aligned with ours.

It is high time that we made a serious commitment to funding production of local, renewable energy resources. By investing in agricultural energy production and energy efficiency, we can create new high-paying jobs in Montana, keep the economies of our small rural towns intact and make our nation more secure.

Sen. Max Baucus, as chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, has already been instrumental in creating workable incentives that support wind, biodiesel and cellulosic ethanol development. Montana's congressional delegation should build on this platform of success by backing increased funding for the Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) in the Farm Bill being considered by Congress. If we are ever to rid ourselves of dependence on foreign oil, we must renew our commitment to creating domestic, rural energy in Montana and elsewhere

Let's put this in perspective. For less than what it costs us to fund six hours of counterterrorism operations and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we could increase funding for the REAP program to five times the level of the last Farm Bill. That would be a big step toward meeting our national goal of producing 25 percent of our domestic energy needs from renewable energy by 2025.

The Farm Bill's Energy Title provides Congress with an unprecedented opportunity to advance clean energy development in Montana on multiple fronts:

1. Renewable Resources: Sparking Community-Owned Energy Production

Energy Title programs are crucial to the development of locally owned wind, solar, geothermal and other renewable energy projects in Montana's rural communities. The flourishing Iowa and Minnesota community wind sectors, for example, were jump-started with Energy Title programs. Our State Renewable Portfolio Standard contains special provisions for community-scale wind projects that begin in 2010, and a stronger REAP will directly help these small, locally owned projects through grant and loan assistance.

2. Cellulosic Biofuels: Accelerating Commercialization

Montana cannot be competitive in corn-based ethanol due to our soils and temperatures, but we have the opportunity to “leapfrog” to cellulosic ethanol by using switchgrass, wheat straw and other Montana crops, grasses, and agricultural waste products. Cellulosic ethanol levels the rural playing field for Montana’s agricultural producers and benefits Montana livestock producers by reducing demand for feed corn. Energy Title programs, like REAP, will enhance farm income and support the emerging cellulosic ethanol industry by encouraging pilot plants using native Montana feedstocks.

3. Conservation: Promoting Cleaner Air, Water

Energy Title programs complement Conservation Title programs by helping ranches act as good environmental stewards. REAP includes an energy technical assistance program to help agriculture reduce energy consumption, energy costs and air and water pollution.

Earlier this year, Sen. Baucus said, “I want to look to the future of agriculture, and a big part of that is going to be energy production. Agriculture producers could hold the key to boosting domestic energy production, and wean us off of foreign oil.” Sen. Baucus’ far-sighted and practical position reflects the beliefs and views of Montanans, which according to statewide polling, overwhelmingly support greater renewable energy investments in the state.

Given Sen. Baucus’s personal commitment, the backing of the public, and the opportunity to transform Montana into a national leader in rural energy production, we urge our congressional delegation to push for REAP funding at five times the level of the previous Farm Bill. Coupled with Gov. Schweitzer’s state-level initiatives, the Energy Title funded at this level can help create a prosperous, significant and sustainable role for energy in Montana agriculture.

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